DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 755 FL 020 953

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TITLE Prioritising Equality of Outcome in Hong Kong Secondary School Education.
REPORT NO ISSN-1015-2059
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 8p.; For the serial issue from which this paper is analyzed, see FL 020 947.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Hongkong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching; v14 p81-87 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Articulation (Education); *Chinese; Educational Planning; *Educational Policy; *English; *Equal Education; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Language of Instruction; Language Research; Linguistic Theory; Outcomes of Education; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

A November 1990 recommendation by the Hong Kong government's education department to adopt a language-streaming policy is discussed. The policy would have children tested and assigned to English-medium or Chinese-medium instruction in the sixth year of elementary school. Implications of this development are examined from the point of view of higher education and from the perspective of providing equal education for all children. Disadvantages to children taught in Chinese and proceeding to higher education are given special attention. Two alternatives are proposed: (1) delaying streaming decisions for an additional 2 years; (2) offering an opportunity for Chinese-medium students to start on their college preparation early; and (3) having students in both streams follow the same curriculum but having Chinese-medium students use the final secondary year to prepare for postsecondary study. It is proposed that because of mandates for higher education to increase enrollment, reduce costs, and compete with other English-speaking countries' universities, the best solution might be for higher education to offer a college-preparatory year for Chinese-medium students. (MSE)

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HONGKONG PAPERS IN LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE TEACHING 14 (1991) ISSN 1015-2059

PRIORITISING EQUALITY OF OUTCOME IN HONG KONG SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Introduction

In November 1990, the Hong Kong Government's Education Department released the 4th in its series of Education Reports (ECR4) prepared by specially-appointed Education Commissions. The ECR4, on Language Improvement Measures for Schools, is already notorious locally for its proposal that government and government-subsidised secondary schools adopt a language streaming policy, using results of an evaluative instrument at Primary 6 to decide which children would benefit from an English-medium secondary education, and which should continue with Chinese-medium education. This paper explores the implications of this recommendation from a tertiary perspective, and questions the extent to which the Commission has properly addressed the problem of equality of opportunity for children issuing from the Chinese-medium stream after 1994. The paper goes on to attribute the evolution of this policy to a widespread lack of understanding of the nature of second-language-medium academic education. This paper is short and at times polemical, but its main arguments have been carefully considered; fuller discussion of background issues can be found in Bruce (1990) and Lewkowicz (1990)[1].

The Problem: Educational Outcome or Process?

One of the driving motives behind the work of the Education Commission has been the desire to create a more equitable distribution of educational and vocational opportunities among Hong Kong's secondary school population -- a utilitarian desire for quality and equality. More specifically, the Commission has undertaken the unenviable task of attempting to enhance the quality of the 'means' or process of education for the majority of children, while preserving the quality and equality of the outcome or 'ends' of that process. Regrettably, in attempting to prescribe remedies for the primary and secondary school sectors, the Commission seemed constrained to 'respect the autonomy' of the tertiary institutions, to the extent that they have been forced to pursue justice under the kind of constraint that utterly confounded Shylock. In an educational system whose tertiary sector is predominantly English medium, linguistic and academic competence are as inextricable as flesh and blood; secondary and tertiary education cannot be segregated when making decisions relating to the development of those competences. It is not enough for the Commission to state (p.117) 'We understand that the Government intends to discuss with the tertiary institutions' those means by which equality of access to tertiary education can be assured.

Policies aimed at tackling shortcomings of both quality and equality will always risk producing the kind of volatile cocktail the Commission has come up with, especially if equality is made to trail behind prescriptions for improved quality. The consumer in Hong Kong is concerned with opportunity, and the freedom to pursue that opportunity for his or her child. The Education Department should have been able to predict the futility of a prescription which is directed at improving both quality and equality in secondary education but which is powerless to ensure equality of value of the product, in terms of access to the most profitable and prestigious career opportunities. In declaring that the majority of students 'would benefit more from their education if they were to learn in their mother tongue' (p.102), the Commission is unlikely to be referring to educational 'benefit' in terms that most parents or major employers would understand. The parent population and employment sectors in Hong Kong are not unique in tending to be concerned primarily with 'optimal proven outcomes' (qualifications testifying to superior ability) rather than the

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intrinsic quality of an education. In Hong Kong, there may well be a basic respect for any student's ability to persevere and triumph at the highest level in what is a foreign-language-medium system, but this is a respect not untinged by cynicism. Centralised curricula and examination systems all too easily develop into highly prescriptive and conservative vehicles for the promotion of conformity, acquiescence and emulation. Paradoxically, in seeking to guarantee fairness and reliability in their reward system, national examination syndicates are drawn into setting the kinds of examination which inevitably privilege norm over criterion referencing, with closed-ended questions breeding in students a belief in the rightness and wrongness of things, and in teachers a disposition to prescription. This not only militates against an intrinsically worthwhile education, but serves to encourage a hierarchical view of education and, in Hong Kong, largely determines access to and exclusion from an English-medium education. Since all tertiary institutions continue to be adamant in requiring certifiable proof of both academic and English competence from all candidates, parents need little assistance in making a 'rational and informed choice as to which medium would suit their children best' (p. 103). It is clear that equality at the end of the secondary 'tunnel' is what is perceived as paramount; despite the Commission's recognition of the 'need to ensure that students learning through Chinese ... are not disadvantaged' (p.116), an assurance of this equality is what continues to be glaringly absent in the recommendations of the Report.

Basis for a Solution

The easiest solution would be to continue the current free-for-all, which at least has the merit of leaving discrimination to market forces, that is, to the parents' ability to get their children into the right schools, and to the prevailing open access to academic achievement through the examination system. The majority fail to glean much profit from the experience, and are branded as relative failures, but which 'advanced' western education system is free from the same accusation? While the status quo may be a continuation of a colonial system, it does have the merit of being relatively 'democratically-driven'. Given the way the Report's recommendations continue to privilege English-medium schooling, while narrowing the majority of parents' and children's options from an early stage, it is easy to understand their largely hostile reception. My proposals below emanate from the belief that it is possible to achieve greater quality and equality both of the process of education and of career opportunities arising out of that education process.

Any such proposal requires a fundamental change of perspective. Since parents and the employment sector are concerned with outcomes, education needs to be looked at more honestly as being 'end-driven'. That is, the higher and further educational and vocational or professional opportunities - on which most parents have set their sights long before their children reach secondary school - must become the starting point in any analysis and review of the school curriculum. If equality is to be properly recognised as determinant of quality, then the system should be geared to providing equality of opportunity at the **exit** point of secondary education, rather than at the entry or any intermediate point. I shall argue that the heat being generated in debate over the appropriate duration of an English for Academic purposes bridging course is energy subjected to futile combustion.

Token Bridging or the Real Thing: Hobson's Choice

The Education Department (ED) has recommended providing an English bridging programme 'between May and the end of August' (p.117) at the end of Form 7 for all those Chinese-medium students who have been offered provisional acceptance by a tertiary institution. As a move to smooth the path of a linguistically-precocious elite, this could prove an effective as well as economical policy. However, if, as the ECR4 would pretend, the intention is to provide equal opportunity to the 70% of the secondary school intake likely to comprise the Chinese-medium

stream, the Commission has clearly been ignoring the warnings of local English language educators and experts. Most tertiary language learning specialists have recommended a full academic year for the provision of an adequate bridging course for students whose only exposure to English would be in studying the language as another separate subject[2]. This advice has been offered *faute de mieux*, on the assumption that only the **form** of the post-'A' level bridging programme was negotiable; it did not issue from discussion as to whether such a programme was desirable in the first place. If provided as a 'posthumous' supplement to their curriculum, a whole-year bridging programme would put the Chinese-medium students a full year behind their English-medium counterparts. By dismissing this option out of hand, the Government has probably ensured that none of the bridging options will be taken up, and that a broader re-examination of policy options will have to take place. Would that their rationale were related in some way to the question of equality -- an objection, for instance, to arbitrarily shortening one group of children's earning life by a year; sadly, the rejection seems motivated rather by questions of finance and politics: the expense of an additional year for 70% of the secondary school population, and the fact that the proposal smacks of a tertiary Foundation Year being reintroduced through the back door. Its position once stated, the ED is clearly not for turning.

Out of this possible impasse may spring some hope for a more equitable bilingual education policy. It is clear to all concerned that equality of opportunity in the face of an English-medium tertiary sector and English-rewarding employment sector cannot be bought easily or cheaply. The optional solutions offered here require recognition of a principle that the Commission has already accepted in its rationale for Target-related assessment: that levels of academic (and linguistic) attainment are not rigidly tied to age or age groups. In both alternative 'bridging' proposals offered below, I advocate a system which is geared to ensuring that children exit from both English-medium and Chinese-medium schools with the same level of linguistic and academic preparedness, and therefore opportunity, and at the same age. This last point is crucial; educationists seem too ready to talk of additional years for bridging courses. Parents will perceive only the building of a further dimension of inequality into the educational system. This system at least currently offers their children open, albeit 'handicapped'[3], competition with each other right up to the final 'A' level hurdle.

Two Proposals

1. A 'Head-Start' Scheme

The ECR4 proposes assigning schoolchildren to English and Chinese-medium streams at the end of Primary 6, as part of the exercise of allocation to a secondary school. A scheme of target-related assessments is proposed, in English, Chinese and mathematics, to determine which children gain entry to an English-medium stream. The stigma of failure at this juncture cannot easily be attenuated by talk of what is educationally 'best' for a child. This alternative proposal advocates the delay of decisions on streaming to the end of secondary Form 2. Not only would this avert enormous psychological pressure being applied to children at a transitional point in their education, but it would fall at the juncture in the secondary curriculum when pupils, and their parents, are deciding on their 'O' level programme and orientation. As a result of target-related assessment at the end of Form 2, pupils allocated places in the English-medium stream should be put through a bridging year aimed at preparing them for a 2-year 'O' level curriculum in the exclusive medium of English. Pupils allocated to the Chinese-medium stream would commence immediately with their 'O' level studies in Secondary 3, following a path which would take them to the equivalent of 'O' level and 'A' or 'AS' level[4] one year ahead of the current schedule, giving them a 'head start' on the English-medium stream students.

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By this system, Chinese-medium 'O' level graduates would have the option of continuing to 'A' level or leaving school to take up further education or full employment opportunities, while 'A' level graduates (one year ahead of their English-medium counterparts) would have the option of an academically and/or vocationally-oriented English-rich bridging programme, followed by entry into either tertiary education or the job marketplace. Since the Government has calculated that, by 1994-95, there will be first degree places in tertiary education for four out of five 'A' level matriculants, and given the proportion who will continue to seek tertiary education outside the territory, we can anticipate that the overwhelming demand would be for the academic route. The Chinese-medium 'O' level syllabus would ideally feature a) a strong English language component, and b) one examinable but non-critical subject in the medium of English, to provide students with minimal but essential exposure to English as a learning medium. As I suggest later, this could well be the ill-fated Liberal Studies 'AS' course. The post-'A' level 'bridging' programme would continue the development of students' conceptual and rhetorical skills, but in the medium of English. Any gaps in subject knowledge base resulting from the compression of the curriculum, and its gearing to the average student capability, could be made up in this bridging year. By this system, the offer of tertiary places would be based on 'A' and 'AS' level results. The offer to Chinese-stream matriculants would be conditional on their satisfying an English requirement at the end of the 'bridging' year -- currently grade 'D' on the Use of English exam.

The principle premise behind this proposal is that even the majority of the top 30% of the current crop of English-medium school matriculants entering university -- those destined for the estimated 30% place allocation to English-medium schooling in 1994 -- lack the necessary English and study skills to cope with an English-medium tertiary education in Hong Kong[5]. The proposed antidote is to use the year before the 'O' level syllabus commences (3rd year) to concentrate on the medium of study at the expense of new examinable content. This approach is based on the belief that not only can the system accommodate different rates of learning, but that the substantive (subject-based) agenda can vary across, for example, language streams, as long as it serves more transferrable and durable educational objectives, such as the development of analytical and critical thinking, and powers of argumentation and speculation.

A valid criticism of this proposal is that it would seem to ignore the high correlation between linguistic proficiency -- specifically English language proficiency -- and academic attainment. Children gaining entry to the English-medium stream are likely to be academically precocious; having them study the same subject matter one year behind their Chinese-medium counterparts might be interpreted as gross underexploitation of their learning potential. The alternative proposal offered below is a concession to this objection, but it is, in my opinion, the weaker option, constituting a concession to a traditional abhorrence of any retardation to the education of the 'gifted' child.

2. An Alternative 6th-Form Agenda

Students in both streams would follow the same curriculum, in parallel, as far as 'O' level, after which Chinese-medium stream students would only take 'AS' or 'H' levels, examinable at the end of Form 6. Tertiary places would be offered on the strength of those results -- provisional on the satisfactory completion of the same 'bridging' year as proposed above. There would still be a uniform entry point for tertiary education -- post-Form 7 -- with a bridging year for Chinese-stream students, offering preparation for either tertiary education or the business and technological professions.

While this option would require a more systematic effort to bring Chinese-medium students' knowledge base up to that of their English-medium counterparts, it does have the merit of operating with an established curriculum, that used by Chinese-medium schools preparing students for the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This close correspondence to the system currently practised by

the Chinese University makes this alternative more practicable. It might, then, be considered premature that the one-year 'H' level is to be phased out in 1992 (H.K. Education Department, 1989), given that these qualifications are currently deemed satisfactory for entry to Scottish Universities (which also operate a 'Higher' certificate exam system), subject to proof of competence in English. This proposal appeals less to the principle of different learning rates or stages, but like the first proposal does subordinate curricular 'content' to what we have identified as more transferrable and durable educational objectives, the development of those intellectual and communicative powers without which content knowledge remains inert and undigested by the learner.

Implications for the Tertiary Sector

The University of Hong Kong has already informed the Government of its own diagnosis of the language in education problem, in its rationale for a Foundation Year (University of Hong Kong, 1988). Neither the English or Chinese-medium systems has been able to prepare students adequately for academic study. Now the Government has decided that the number of first degree places must be increased by 100% by 1997. The fact that it has also suggested that this can be done 'without sacrificing quality' (p.3) and, as recent indications from the UPGC make clear, by increasing the staff-student ratio, indicates a worrying lack of awareness of the nature and scale of the language problem in tertiary education (see Wong, 1984; So, 1988). The Commission's prescriptions for English include exhortations to the tertiary sector to 'do more to strengthen the current English improvement courses' (p. 117) for undergraduates; yet all the signs point to government funding of English training at tertiary level being cut back to a fraction of what was being promised a year ago.

The real danger in the Government's effectively minimising the responsibility of the tertiary institutions for tackling the English problem is that the tertiary sector will be encouraged to continue to live with an ill-defined second-language-medium identity. Where the secondary sector takes its references largely from within Hong Kong, its educational targets being effectively set by the Territory's own tertiary institutions, the tertiary sector is obliged to measure itself against the advanced first-language-medium tertiary systems of the United Kingdom, the United States and the Commonwealth. It does not require advanced arithmetic to discern the improbability of attempting, in a second language, to emulate the standards of those institutions within a 3-year degree programme, at a time when increasing numbers of 'first language' universities in the U.K. are opting for 4-year undergraduate programmes. As long as the curricula remain unashamedly content-based, and funds to develop English training -- the medium through which this content is mediated -- continue to be cut back, questions have to be asked about the quality of tertiary education being offered in Hong Kong. The tertiary institutions are equally guilty of being seduced by the veneer rather than the substance of students' intellectual endeavour. Recent attempts to introduce a Liberal Studies AS level subject into the 6th form curriculum, and have it accepted as a compulsory subject for university entry, have met with an unsympathetic reception from both University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology; neither is prepared to make it compulsory, and this effectively will discourage schools from offering the course, and students from taking it. [For a more optimistic prognosis, compare Falvey, this volume]. There remains some hope that, since the Liberal Studies syllabus aims to develop academic and intellectual skills, rather than teach a body of knowledge, its future might well lie in a tertiary bridging programme for Chinese-medium students after 1994.

Conclusion

There is an overwhelming case for an Education Commission to be established to conduct a wide-ranging examination of the provision of tertiary English-medium education in Hong Kong. Some of its likely brief should have fallen within the compass of this Commission, which should, for

example, have distinguished between the learning needs and conditions characteristic of first-and second-language-medium education systems -- at both secondary and tertiary levels. The Commission's attempt to exclude consideration of the tertiary sector from practically all areas of its deliberations has resulted in one of the major weaknesses of the Report.

The evidence points to Chinese-medium matriculants becoming the victims of a parsimonious and almost casual Government policy towards the language problems they will be facing in tertiary education later in the 1990's. The use of the term 'remedial' as a hardy perennial to dismiss the claims of English to serious funding at tertiary level is indicative of the lack of understanding of the role of language in second-language-medium academic education. Unless there is radical re-thinking of this issue by the Government, the kinds of reforms being entertained in the Report -- and in my suggestions above -- will not make a significant contribution to the problem of student aptitude for English-medium tertiary education in Hong Kong.

NOTES

1. Bruce (1990) deals with some of the problems of running an L2-medium education system, with special reference to Hong Kong. Lewkowicz (1990) summarises the broader criticisms of the ECR4 report made by staff of the Language Centre of University of Hong Kong, and records the responses to those criticisms offered by a leading member of the Education Commission.

2. See Lewkowicz (1990), summarising HKU Language Centre's response to the 1989 'white paper' version of the Education Commission's 4th Report. Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, in its response to the final ECR4 (Crawford and Hui 1991) also describes the proposed three-month programme as 'totally inadequate' and, at a special colloquium held to debate options for a secondary-to-tertiary bridging programme (20/12/90 at the HK Convention Centre), secondary and tertiary English teachers voted almost unanimously in favour of a minimum one-year bridging course.

3. A major handicapping factor is the ability of the different schools to provide effective English-medium instruction, and the Commission has made a number of recommendations to remedy this problem.

4. Latest figures on Use of English grades of University of Hong Kong 1st-year entrants show that only 17.6% score A or B on that examination.

5. 'AS' levels are 'supplementary advanced' level courses, intended to be taken in a single academic year, much like the 'H' level which is soon to be phased out, and which corresponds closely to the Scottish 'Higher' level 6th-form course.

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